How green is becoming the new black in the textile chain



It is out with the traditional silks and wools and in with the corn, soya and cellulose in the garment and textile industries, and these newer sustainable fibres are even penetrating the high-end and haute couture markets. An increasing number of consumers are embracing a more socially conscious outlook, with textiles and apparel at the cutting edge of the organic lifestyle. Sufficient customers to make a marketing difference are now seeking quality merchandise made by companies that use sustainable materials, respect the environment, support their employees and give something back to the community. According to president of Vancouver-based sustainable fibres and fabrics producer Naturally Advanced Technologies Inc. (NAT), Jason Finnis, it is corporate interest that has led to such a "steep upward trend" in demand. In response to this 'ethical' buying trend, many fabric and garment producers are implementing, or improving upon, eco-friendly production processes and socially responsible practices.

Aloha Lohas

There's another acronym for the industry to get used to: LOHAS. It stands for Lifestyles of Health and Sustainability—and is a group that focuses on social justice, health, environment and sustainability. LOHAS companies, such as Patagonia, Itochu and Nature Works, are committed to providing goods and services in a responsible way using economic and environmentally sustainable business practices. It is claimed that 17% of adults, or approximately 36 million consumers, in the USA are LOHAS consumers, or 'Lohasians', and this figure appears to be increasing rapidly. Interestingly, the two fastest-growing countries in the LOHAS community are Japan and Taiwan. LOHAS objectives are relevant to a wide range of industries such as organic food and clothing,



Focus on recycling and sustainability at Patagonia.
Patagonia, Inc.

energy efficient appliances and even socially responsible investment. It hosts seminars and debates about responsible consumerism at its annual Forum.

In its mission statement, Naturally Advanced Technologies (NAT), which sponsored last year's LOHAS Forum, declares its commitment to producing quality goods with a lower impact on the environment and in a way that benefits all members of the supply chain, "from the farmer to the consumer". Having started out as a company selling a single product (a natural coloured, hemp/cotton blend T-shirt), it has become one of the largest manufacturers of sustainable apparel. It asserts that by making one man-sized T-shirt from 55% hemp/45% cotton rather than 100% cotton, 2,800 litres of water—enough drinking water to sustain one person for more than two years—can be saved. The company's ethical values were brought to the fore at the opening of its Shanghai office in 2001, which not only monitors the quality of the garments produced, but also ensures that working conditions are fair.

Looking at bast fibres

NAT's subsidiary, Crailar Fiber Technologies, Inc. recently signed an agreement with the Alberta Research Council (ARC) under which it will develop bast fibres such as hemp, bamboo and flax, for both winter and summer performance apparel without using harmful petroleum-based products. Its record financial results for the first quarter imply that consumer demand for such fibres and fabrics is on the increase, although this has partly been attributed to its collaboration with the Starbucks Coffee Company. The 'My Starbucks' T-shirt—designed by Mychael Knight using 100% certified organic cotton blend T-shirts from NAT's HT Natural line—was launched as a limited edition item in February. The two companies used the campaign as an opportunity to display their mutual social, economic and environmental concerns, in line with LOHAS values. Mr. Finnis believes that working with large corporations can influence consumer spending and change the way businesses operate. The company aims to "bridge the gap between conventional and alternative; to make sustainability tradition".

Like NAT, technical sock producer Fox River Mills, Inc., which formed part of a panel at the LOHAS 11 Forum in May, tries "whenever possible to leave the least imprint on the earth", according to Branded Division president Joel Anderson. Its Iowa knitting mill is part of a state-of-the-art initiative that has enabled it to reduce energy costs by more than 30%. The company recycles 200,000 kg of materials per year and its annual waste volume has been reduced by more than 50%. It has also adopted successful water reclamation and heat recovery systems. In addition, Fox River uses all-natural insect repellents, organic Merino wool and corn-based fibres to produce its socks. The company's Good Earth 100% biodegradable corn socks are said to offer the performance benefits of synthetic fibres without the use of fossil fuels and is seen as eco-friendly as corn is an annually renewable source.

According to the company, "social justice, health, the environment and sustainability are extremely important" with regard to the way it operates. One of the few apparel manufacturers still making its products in the USA, the company's 300-plus employees live locally and it has introduced various schemes in order to demonstrate its commitment to their safety and to the well-being of the community. Innovation is also of utmost importance, and it points out that, "while more and more consumers are looking for environmentally friendly products, these products must perform. If they do not, consumers will not buy them again no matter how good they are for the planet". It is currently launching new styles with Ingeo (a PLA fibre), organic Merino wool and eco-poly.



Fox socks offer foot and environmental protection.
Fox River Mills, Inc.

Raising standards

Vast improvements in the industry, both in terms of quality and availability of fabrics made from natural sources have also taken place in recent years across the industry. Experiments with new eco-friendly fibres, dyeing techniques and production processes have transformed drab, and often unflattering, 'organic' basics into stylish, glamorous couture that cannot be ignored. Due to the higher production costs often associated with LOHAS values, these elite fabrics are well suited to the high-end market and, in some circles, the ethical story behind a garment has become almost as important as the designer label itself.

The high-end eco goods movement appears to be making its mark. LOHAS company Loudermilk is at the forefront of this trend with its Luxury Eco apparel line in its attempt to "glam up green". According to the company, its clothing is "all about refinement — polished, put-together looks that happen to be made from sustainable fabrics." Its fabrics are made from resources such as sasawashi (a blend of Japanese paper, herbs, vitamins and amino acids, said to have skin-friendly qualities), bamboo, SeaCell (a cellulose and seaweed-based fibre), soya and other self-sustaining plants. It also offers a range of 'Water is a Human Right' products including a tank top and bamboo scarf, and a proportion of the proceeds from these goods is donated to organisations involved in clean water initiatives. Again, eco fashion walks hand-in-hand with social awareness.

Designs on nature

Also inspired by these themes, a London-based designer Deborah Milner creates couture pieces from renewable sources and recycled fabrics, drawing on influences from the year she spent working among the indigenous Yawanawa tribe, helping to preserve natural areas in the Amazon. Her inspiration comes from a genuine desire to protect the environment and tribal cultures and to use her design skills to impact the high-end fashion market by turning eco-friendly textiles into opulent couture. This is not always an easy process. As a result, experimentation has been key to her Ecoture collection, which features a combination of organic and fair trade fabric, and uses tree resin extracts and leaf dyes and carrageenan seaweed. Her line even comprises a white lace wedding dress made from melted plastic bags. So, LOHAS values have also infiltrated the very top-end of the fashion market, and the Milner collection confirms that sticking to its values need not entail compromising on quality or beauty.

There are other problems associated with what appear to be sustainable production methods and companies need to be careful about adopting a 'holier than thou attitude'. Challenges to their eco credentials can be mounted and the growing and processing of a number of natural fibres are considered harmful to the environment by some campaigners.

Higher production costs also apply to companies using ethical practices as opposed to cheaper alternatives. The question that companies must ask themselves is, will consumers be prepared to pay extra for a product that is derived from a renewable source, or that is made using eco-friendly production methods, or that helps to sustain a particular people group? With the number of LOHAS consumers and companies apparently growing across the globe, the answer appears to be 'yes'. It appears that consumers are beginning to weigh the financial cost against the cost of human suffering and environmental damage. They could be willing to pay more for products that do not literally 'cost the earth'.

